

# **THE NARRATIVE OF THE FACEBOOK SCANDAL FROM TWEETS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF #DELETEFACEBOOK**

Yasmine Khosrowshahi and Ananda Mitra  
*Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC 27106, USA*

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper offers an analysis of the narrative emerging from nearly 11,000 tweets related to the scandal surrounding Cambridge Analytica and Facebook. The narrative analysis demonstrates that the users were annoyed with the way their information was used but were also unhappy with the fact that users need to be more mindful and attentive of the way in which they use Facebook. The methodology used a text analytic process to analyze the content of the tweets which serve as narrative bits or narbs.

## **KEYWORDS**

Narb, Narrative Analysis, Tweet, Facebook, Cambridge Analytica

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The issue of privacy arose around Facebook when a scandal involving Cambridge Analytica was released in early March. It is estimated that nearly 87 million users were affected by the scandal. Forbes explains that the scandal actually started several years back when Facebook exposed the data from millions of users to an academics researcher (DeMars, 2018). That academics researcher, a Russian-American named Aleksandr Kogan, used a quiz app, similar to a personality quiz app Psychometrics Centre made, called “thisisyourdigitallife” (Meredith, 2018). The app was used to pull more data from users than they should have been allowed to. The Atlantic Media Company says that 270,000 people installed Kogan’s app on their Facebook account. Just like any Facebook developer then, Kogan was able to access data about those users and their friends (Meyer, 2018). Kogan then sold all the data to Cambridge Analytica (CA) to then use as part of the 2016 US election for marketing and advertising for Trump. The information created targeted ads at users on Facebook. Christopher Wylie, a key player in the scandal, says, “We exploited Facebook to harvest millions of people’s profiles and built models to exploit what we knew about them and target their inner demons. That was the basis the entire company was built on” (Staff, Al Jazeera, 2018). Since the news broke, many have put out the #DeleteFacebook hashtag to promote the end of using the social media platform (Rosenberg, 2018). The objective of this paper is to use the micro-blogging the hashtag in order to understand the stories circulating in the digital world around this scandal from early March. Here, we argue that the data collected explains how privacy in the digital world is extremely valuable to users and that once their trust has been broken, they use the digital world, ironically, the let their voices be heard.

## **2. NARRATIVE PARADIGM**

The construct of looking at culture, communication and human behavior and beliefs through the lens of a narrative was suggested by the work of Walter Fisher who in turn based his work on earlier scholars who identified the importance of story-telling and narratives in the process of making meaning of everyday life as people operate within the cultural and social spaces that they occupy (see, e.g., Andrews, 1982; MacIntyre, 1981; Ricouer, 1977, 1983, 1984; White, 1984). Fisher suggested, people can operate as a narrative being where the act of creating and articulating a coherent and rational narrative becomes a part of being human. In

doing this, the narrative paradigm offers a different way of analyzing and understanding communication, and the way in which people act.

There are many aspects of the narrative paradigm that merit examination in the early Twenty-first Century of Big Data, particularly when the analysis of large data sets seeks to provide an account of how persons come to believe and behave (see, e.g., Kosinski, et. al. 2013). The narrative paradigm suggests that it is possible to examine a story to seek internal coherence and fidelity of a story. In this case, the story related to gun violence is examined through the narbs that were produced around the hashtag: “deletefacebook.”

### 3. NARRATIVE DATA AND ANALYSIS

In this case, the narbs were composed of nearly 11,000 tweets that were collected when the hashtag “deletefacebook” soon after the issue gained attention in 2018. The specific tweets were collected, and the content of the tweets were then analyzed to extract a narrative map which is a visual representation of specific narrative.

The outcome of the process is the creation of a narrative map composed of narrative categories, which are shown as circles or “nodes” on the map, that are connected with each other by the lines connecting the nodes. The volume of occurrence of each category in the corpus of narbs (visually represented by the diameter of each node of the map) and the strength of relationship between categories (visually represented by the thickness of the line connecting the nodes).

### 4. FINDINGS

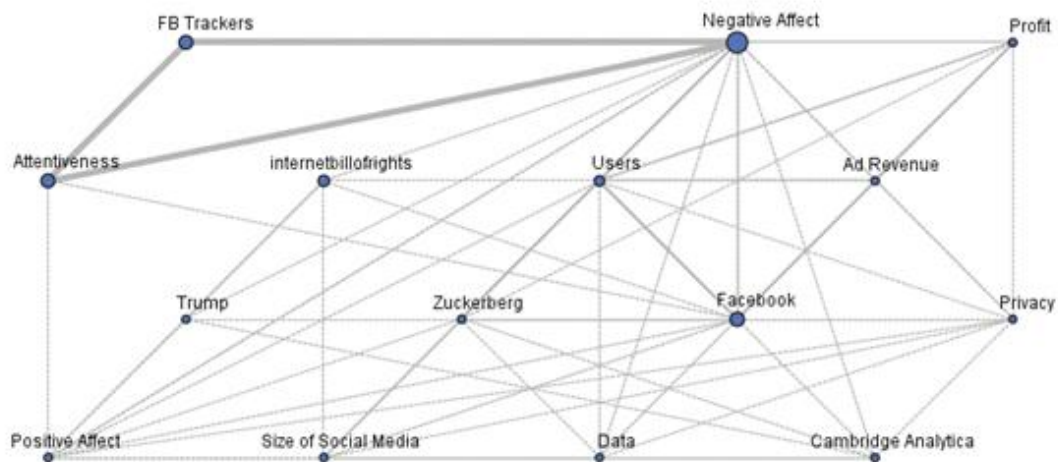


Figure 1. Narrative map of the categories extracted from the narbs

The interpretation of the narrative map (Figure 1) shows a strong negative affect with almost all of the narbs collected to create the map. It portrays a deep frustration towards the scandal related to Facebook. The strong negative affect connected with the idea of Facebook tells the story that the use of the social media platform is considered negatively. With a small connection to positive affect and an overall controversial topic since the scandal, Facebook continues to be the center of much concern regarding what is truly private in the digital world. The concern of being tracked on Facebook and how closely we pay attention to those trackers is demonstrated by the connection among FB trackers, attentiveness, and negative affect. When the scandal came to light it was clear that no one ever imagined that their privacy was being invaded as they used social media platforms. The thick lines indicate a strong relationship where FB trackers and attentiveness are negatively associated. It seems that the less attentive that users are, the more likely they are to fall victim to

trackers such as the FB trackers. The Atlantic Media Company even explains how the app was created similar to a personality quiz app. Just by the trust users had in the previous app, they used it, not realizing, that it opened access to data about the users and their friends which was then saved in a private database instead of being deleted immediately (Meyer, 2018). When it got to the hands of Cambridge Analytica, they “used it to make 30 million ‘psychographic’ profiles about voters” (Meyer, 2018). The trust users had in the digital world allowed them to have low attentiveness to what they were actually doing, thereby voluntarily using the app without knowledge of what it was taking from them. The connection between negative affect and a number of other categories including Internet bill of rights, Trump, users, data, Facebook, Cambridge Analytica, Ad Revenue, and profit also demonstrates that scandal led to a chain of micro-blogging about all the different negative relationships.

The narrative codes also explain the relationship among categories that were spoken about with a negative affect directly linked to it on the map. The triangle for users, Facebook, and negative affect validates the point that users had a negative affect towards Facebook after the scandal broke out. The lines show a strong relationship between users and negative affect and user and Facebook but a weak relationship between Facebook and negative affect. This indicates that the focus is around the users more than Facebook. Many sources discuss what Facebook did to users, not stating a negative or positive affect but rather just an understanding of how it took users information. This fits the triangle and if there are sources written about this relationship then many of the tweets extracted must have done the same. It is also clear that the triangles that negative affect create are all connected with users as well. Therefore, Internet bill of rights, data, Ad Revenue, and profit all create triangles individually with user and negative affect to show that users are negatively affected by each of these categories.

Negative affect seems to be the category with the most relationships and interconnectedness on the map. The strongest of which is the triangle for FB trackers, attentiveness, and negative affect discussed above. What is also clear in the narrative is the fact that there is no connection between negative affect and Zuckerberg, which suggests that, in this narrative, there is no negative affect for Zuckerberg. While many categories had negative affects however, many categories had an equal amount of positive and negative affects. For instance, Trump had the same weak relationship with negative affect as with positive affect. This suggests that in this narrative Trump was not strongly affected by the scandal overall. Much of what Cambridge Analytica did was in favor of helping Trump win the election, which it did, thus creating that positive affect. However, with the reveal of the motives behind what CA did, a negative affect can also be linked to Trump. There were also many other categories such as users, Facebook, privacy, and attentiveness that had both positive and negative affects indicating that for many categories, there were split feelings and opinions.

In addition to the thickness of the lines indicating a stronger relationship, the size of the circle also indicates the number of narbs the category has. So for instance, negative affect has the largest circle on the map, meaning there are the most narbs for that category. Aside from negative affect, Facebook Tracker, attentiveness, and Facebook all have larger circles than the rest of the categories and these are the categories talked about most. Most of the categories on the map have the same size circle and same line thickness which means that they are equally all talked about in regard to the hashtag. It is clear that negative affect and its relationship with the categories, especially Facebook Tracker and attentiveness, are the most spoken about.

Another interesting triangle is the connection with users, Zuckerberg, and Facebook. Since the Facebook scandal, many users have blamed the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, thus it would make sense that there would be a correlation among the three categories. In addition, since Zuckerberg went in front of congress, there was even more talk about him in relation to users and Facebook. It even seems as if the lines should be thicker from much discussion about the relationship among these three categories. Many articles and sources have surfaced regarding the situation in front of congress. Facebook even streamed it live however this narrative indicates that there was not a strong connection with Zuckerberg, Facebook, and users.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The variety of connections suggest that people have many opinions in regard to the hashtag #DeleteFacebook. The narrative, created from the narbs, tells a story about the reaction prompted from the invasion of privacy. Many aspects such as the privacy of thought are presented in the digital space. A common way to do that on Facebook may be through status updates. Communicating on the social media platform allows an individual or a group to have a presence in the digital world. It creates a sense of agency; power. Privacy is meant to protect analog thoughts. This protection is needed because we believe there is a

threat. Researchers have found that privacy is extremely important to Facebook users but not enough of them are aware enough about the level of privacy they have on the social media site (Netchitailova, 2012). This narrative reveal that privacy was negatively affected because users realized that nothing was safe for them given that Facebook took their personal information.

The Facebook scandal has affected millions of people who now have a better understanding that nothing is safe in the digital world. These findings can be further embellished in many ways. It is likely that this sample of narbs that were used to create this narrative could have come from a group with directly ties to Facebook. Facebook has around 2.19 billion monthly active users, many of which the scandal directly affected. This would explain the fact that this scandal grew to a point where congress was involved, and the narrative map created a large negative affect. The issue can be further explored in many different ways such as expanding on the hashtag used to collect the data.

In addition, the narrative created from the hashtag gives a largely one-sided account on the negative affects since the hashtag itself is negative. It would be interesting to look closer at the positive affects if there are any. Much of the cause of the scandal is related to political motives for the 2016 US election. In this story the issue has a strong correlation to the feelings of those with a strong opinion towards the breach in privacy. The narbs tell a personal narrative about how this scandal reveals the lack of privacy in the digital world and how that negatively affected others..

## REFERENCES

- Andrews, J. D. (1982). The structuralist study of narrative: its history, use and limits. In P. Hernadi (Ed.). *The horizon of literature* (pp. 99-124). Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press.
- Beres, D. (2018). It's Time to Protect Yourself - and Your Friends - from Facebook." *Mashable*.
- DeMers, J. (2018). What Marketers Can Learn From The Facebook Scandal. *Forbes Magazine*.
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument, *Communication Monographs*, 51, 1–22.
- Fisher, W. R. (1985a). The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration, *Communication Monographs*, 52, 347–367.
- Fisher, W. R. (1985b). The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning, *Journal of Communication*, 35, 74–89.
- Staff. (2018). Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal so Far. *News / Al Jazeera*.
- Kosinski, M., Stillwell D. J., & Graepel, T. (2013). Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.
- M Pilgun, G Gradoselskaya (2015): — Political Communication on Facebook: Russian Casell. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 70, pp. 726 to 749.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory (2nd ed)*. Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press.
- Meredith, S. (2018). Here's Everything You Need to Know about the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. *CNBC*.
- Meyer, R. (2018). The Cambridge Analytica Scandal, in 3 Paragraphs. *The Atlantic*.
- Mitra, A. (2010). Creating a Presence on Social Networks via Narbs. *Global Media Journal*, 9(16).
- Mitra, A. (2011). Using narratives from social network to manage teacher-student interaction. In (Méndez-Vilas, Ed.), *Education in a technological world: communicating current and emerging research and technological efforts*. Formatex Research Center.
- Mitra, A. (2014b). *Digital DNA: Managing Identity in Social Networking Sites*. New Delhi, India: Rupa Publications.
- Mitra, A. (2018). *Needs Assessment: A Systematic Approach to Data Collection, 2nd Edition*. Sagamore Publishing: Urbana-Champaign, IL.
- Netchitailova, E. (2012). Facebook as a Surveillance Tool: From the Perspective of the User. *Triple C*.
- Ricouer, P. (1977). The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as text. In F. R. Dallmayr & T. A. McCarthy (Eds.), *Understanding and social inquiry* (pp. 316-334). Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ricouer, P. (1983). The narrative function. In J. B. Thompson (Ed.), *Paul Ricouer, hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language, action, and interpretation* (pp. 274-296). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricouer, P. (1984). *Time and narrative* (Vol. 1, K. McLaughlin & D. Pellaur, Trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rosenberg, M. (2018). How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions. *The New York Times*.